

**Congress of the United States**  
**Washington, DC 20515**

April 14, 2009

Richard R. Verma  
Assistant Secretary for Legislative Affairs  
Department of State  
2201 C Street NW  
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Mr. Verma:

Based on your correspondence dated April 7, 2009, regarding the Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative (WHTI), we are writing today to underline the urgency of establishing a permanent passport issuance agency in Western New York.

We feel obligated to note at the outset that we find ourselves at something of a disadvantage in this matter. While you note in your letter that the Department is currently "evaluating additional sites for passport agencies in the United States," you do not provide any information on the decision-making process that governs site selection. This includes, for instance, the identities of the official(s) responsible for making these determinations, a timeline that guides the selection process, and the structure of any formal inter- or intra-agency deliberations. Without this information, we cannot provide our constituents with a complete understanding of how – and more importantly, when – a passport agency will be placed in Western New York.

When the passport agency in Detroit opened last month, for instance, its acting director stated that in light of the June 1<sup>st</sup> switchover, "we wanted to make sure to include passport agencies close to the northern and southern border." The Buffalo-Niagara region represents the fourth-most heavily traversed border crossing in the United States, fielding more private traffic last year than Detroit and Port Huron, MI combined. It would stand to reason, then, that Western New York is at the top of the list for a passport agency. Yet, we have no way of determining whether that is the case without knowing more about the decision-making process that governs site selection.

A brief examination of a small sampling of the Department's selection criteria makes plain why Western New York deserves a passport issuance agency. For instance, with regards to real estate factors, we would point out that the Buffalo market has been as resistant to the housing crisis as any other. Of course, we would be happy to work with local officials and make recommendations for optimal agency locations. Unfortunately, without a fuller understanding of the Department's decision-making process, we do not know how such guidance should be submitted.

We would also note that your letter made note of the hundreds of passport acceptance facilities currently open in Western New York. This is a testament to the fact that the U.S. Postal Service has a considerable presence in our region, which is another of your primary selection criteria. Your letter does not, however, indicate whether a region must meet certain infrastructural benchmarks to qualify for a passport agency, and if so, what those standards are.

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We would be happy to discuss this matter further at your earliest convenience. In the interim, we respectfully request that the Department make available to our offices and to the public pertinent information regarding the decision-making process that governs passport agency site selection. As we have demonstrated throughout this letter, such information would go a long way towards making our constituents better understand why a passport office has yet to be established in Western New York. Complete transparency on this issue is an absolute necessity if we are to meet the Department's stated commitment to ensuring a smooth transition come June 1<sup>st</sup>.

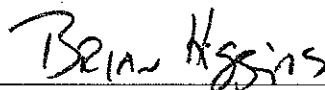
Thank you for your attention. We appreciate the fact that you have recognized the potential financial impact of WHTI on our constituents and we look forward to working with you to place a passport agency in Western New York in short order.

Sincerely,



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CHRISTOPHER J. LEE  
Member of Congress



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BRIAN HIGGINS  
Member of Congress